

THE YORK *CRUCIFIXION*: ECONOMIC FOCUS AND SPIRITUAL SOLVENCY

Damon Kraft

The York dramatist's treatment of Christ's Passion is a disturbing depiction of Jesus's execution. Graphic images and symbolism, coupled with the nonchalant fashion in which the act of crucifixion itself is performed, make for an unsettling spectacle, but, unsurprisingly, literary critics are drawn to the blood. For example, Claire Sponsler, in her book *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, and Theatricality in Late Medieval England*, rightly challenges readings that dismiss the importance of the physical violence in the pageants, and she argues that "depictions of violence questioned the notion of orderly social harmony" and "serve as images of resistance" (138). Sponsler is not alone, though. Critics such as Cliff Davidson, Jonathan Herold, and Peter Travis have all discussed Christ's tortured body, and my intention here is not to refute the findings of these critical investigations. It is my claim, however, that if one attempts to part Christ's blood and the wealth of critical ink intermingled with it, one will find additional substance in the play.

In particular, there is an emphasis on economic language in the York version of the *Crucifixion* that makes it different from other cycle presentations of the same biblical scene. In many ways the accounts in the Wakefield Cycle and the Chester Cycle are more true to the biblical analogue because more characters are included in the action. Mary, Joseph, and others all have roles in Wakefield and Chester. Thus in the *Crucifixion*, audience members of these two cycles see the continued pain of Christ's family and followers as they wish to take his tortured body down from the cross, and this type of dramatic account closely represents its source material. But the York *Crucifixion* significantly alters the biblical analogue; it removes the presence of Christ's family and focuses on the actions and words of soldiers. Although the dramatist calls them soldiers, they are more accurately described as artisans because of the attention that the playwright pays to workmanship throughout the text, and no example makes this more clear than when the group turn their attention to their jobs twenty-five lines into the text:

I MILES. Thanne to þis werke vs muste take heede,
So þat oure wirkyng be noght wronge. (25-26)

The “work” that the men embark upon continues to be stressed, and their actions are discussed in fine detail as they labor to pin Christ to the cross. The guild that performs the Crucifixion scene is the Pinners, but the play is not concerned only with the production of goods, as one might think that a play performed by artisans might be. It is concerned as well with the distribution of goods. Therefore, it is my contention that the play has a vested interest in economic issues more generally, a possibility that has been raised by critics such as David Bevington, Alan Justice, and Donald McClure.

It is this emphasis on economics that allows the York dramatist to send his audience a powerful warning, one that is less closely tied to Christ’s tortured body and thus to much of the existing criticism on the text. My primary argument in this article is that the York *Crucifixion*, through the soldiers who work to pin Jesus, shows the dangers of becoming too consumed in economic endeavors. In doing so, it represents a different kind of model for how a bourgeois medieval audience might be able to negotiate the tensions that surround money and one’s spiritual health.

The social climate of medieval England made it important to discuss the relationship between wealth and spiritual health. The mystery plays enjoyed great popularity from the end of the fourteenth century until the middle of the sixteenth century, and this time frame coincides with an important social development in England, the rise of the middle strata, a term coined by Sylvia Thrupp. The three estates model, which includes three classes, describes the traditional view of medieval society: the aristocracy, clergy, and laborers. This model continued to be preached until late in the Middle Ages, and evidence for this can be seen in the sermons of Thomas Wimbeldon, who, in a 1388 sermon, discusses the social classes in terms of a parable. Wimbeldon stresses the importance of maintaining order; by implication keeping order preserves a hierarchy in the social system, for without the labor of the third estate, the first two “higher classes” would not be able to “mayntene Goddis Lawe” (Aers 7-8). Discussions of the importance of the Three Estates were disseminated from more sources than just sermons, however, as shown by the legal writings of Henry de Bracton. Paul Strohm, in his book *Social Chaucer*, notes that de Bracton embraces a traditional, conservative model: “Hierarchy is

maintained by a detailed attention to the secular and religious aristocracies on the one hand, and a more sketchy but dutiful attention to the peasantry on the other, without the acknowledgment of ‘middle’ or other intervening categories that could blur this strict separation of social levels” (2). But though discussions like de Bracton’s and Wimbledon’s were prevalent, the system of social stratification was not so neatly divided. As readers of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* are well aware, and as the Miller makes all too clear when he breaks the pre-ordained order of tale telling based on class hierarchy, there were an increasing number of individuals in the late Middle Ages who could not be classified by any of the ranks set forth by the three estates.

As the number of people who could be identified as members of the middle strata increased, their social power and, more importantly, their material wealth also increased, and those in the middle strata were becoming the economic equals to the higher classes. The aristocracy issued a poll tax in 1379 to defray war costs, and collectors defined groups by the amount that they would be taxed. The first group identified in the *Rotuli Parliamentorum* includes members of the aristocracy: barons, bannerets, and prosperous knights. They were taxed 40s, while bachelors and esquires were taxed 20s. The third group listed in the records is comprised of various members of the emerging middle strata: mayors of smaller cities were taxed 40s, and grand merchants of the realm were taxed 20s. As one can see based on this evidence, aristocratic and middle strata citizens were being assessed the same amount in taxes, which suggests that they were financial peers, though not equal in perceived social standing. But the increased financial success created anxiety about one’s spiritual health for those in the middle strata, and Lillian Bisson refers to this anxiety that many experienced: “However, because the era’s conceptual framework did not readily integrate the new economic realities, the shifts exacted a psychological cost. Negative attitudes about engaging in trade lingered for centuries, and people worried that accumulating wealth would negate their chances for salvation” (165). By “conceptual framework,” Bisson is referring to the teachings of the Church because, although the social structure was undergoing significant changes, many of the teachings did not reflect the shifting social landscape.

During the Middle Ages, the Church stressed the importance of not being attached to material wealth, and theologians went to great lengths to impress this message upon their audiences. G. R. Owst provides ample evidence of this in *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*,

and examples like the following were commonplace when detailing the evils of money and material possessions: "He ne suffreth him nouȝt to have slepe, ne reste, by niȝte ne by day; bot maketh him travayle in water and in londe, in chele and in hete, in feyntyse and in werynesse. Ryȝt as a spythur destroyeth here-self in makynge a webbe for to take a flye, ryȝt so the coveytous man destroyeth his owene body for to gete thys worldes goed" (352). Similes comparing covetousness to animals are mild when compared to the point of view of the Franciscans who, in the early thirteenth century, ordered that brothers should not have direct contact with money in any fashion. As Lester Little explains, this mandate originated with Francis himself, and the nature of his demands was even more extreme than one might initially expect: "The stories told about Francis and money show an almost pathological fear of touching what to him was filthy and disgusting. In one story he reprimanded a brother for picking up a sack of money and just then the money turned into a snake. And once, to punish a brother who had picked up a coin left as an offering (only to throw it away, we might add), Francis had the brother pick up the coin with his teeth and place it in a dung-heap" (164).

Friars, however, were responsible for creating new forms of religious expression, specifically for those within the urban sector of society, through integrating religious life with intellectual development. This development was spurred by the formation of universities, and both masters and students, which included the Dominicans and Franciscans, "became participants in the busy pattern of urban life, having to confront such problems as material support, lodgings away from home, fees, and salaries" (Little 173). While study at the monasteries focused upon intensive study and reading of the Bible, memorization in effect, urban scholars, "while retaining their respect for the received tradition and drawing strength from it, sought to expose its weaknesses and contradictions in order to build upon it, in order to reach higher and to see further" (Little 174).

Thus there was a shift in the thirteenth century, influenced by the work of Aquinas, to think of money in more straightforward, rationale ways because "he defined [money] as a measure of the price of things and as a medium of exchange" (Little 178). Despite this shift, the benefits of poverty were being proclaimed from more avenues than just the clergy. The source material for some of the greatest authors of the time was validating the same sentiments. For example, Boccaccio's *Filocolo*, which provided Chaucer's inspiration for the *Franklin's Tale*,

notes the positive qualities of being exempt from material wealth: "Poverty is the renunciation of riches, an unappreciated good, which puts temptations to flight—a fact which Diogenes fully understood. Poverty finds sufficient whatever nature requires. Whoever lives with her in patience lives secure from any deceit. Nor is he prevented from achieving great honor, if he lives virtuously in the way we have described" (133). The claims in this passage are anything but discreet, and, though virtuous poverty is not one of Chaucer's primary motivations in his tale, it is important to note that the message was being conveyed from many different sources. Though there were many individuals in the Middle Ages who saw their material worth rapidly increasing, their chances of attaining grace, according to Church authorities and some popular authors, were diminishing equally as rapidly.

One of the concerns that readers may have is my use of "economics" more generally, but this term is meant to account for the audience of the play. The dramatist is attempting to send a message to an urban bourgeois audience that would have been comprised of citizens with many different occupations, such as artisans and merchants, and the text's use of time is suggestive of the intended broad scope. Fifteen lines into the play, we learn that the prisoner not only has to be killed, but that the execution is on a time restriction:

II Miles. He muste be dede nedelyngis by none.

III Miles. Þanne is goode tyme þat we begynne. (15-16)

Though the noon death is in accordance with the biblical analogue, the focus in the subsequent lines is on the third soldier's statement that the group needs to be working and that time is of the essence. The association of time, work, and productivity can be seen when the first soldier, only nine lines later, reminds everyone that "Thanne to þis werke vs muste take heede" (25). The second soldier concurs, noting, "But latte vs haste hym for to hange" (28). Finally, the third soldier weighs in, encouraging, "And I haue gone for gere goode speede" (29). The word choices throughout these lines, "time," "begin," "heed," "haste," and "speed," enforce the notion that the best worker is one that not only works hard, but is also one that works efficiently, and this is a message that would have resonated with the contemporaries in medieval York.

This connection is because of the multiple concepts of time during the Middle Ages: merchant's time and church's time. The York dramatist highlights the distinction between these two concepts and thus shows the dangers of being too consumed by the former, for all workers are guided by merchant's time. Strohm describes merchant's time as the "secularized basis of productive effort, providing the terms in which use and productivity can be measured" (123). On the other hand, "Church's time is experienced in relation to eternity, from which it is provisionally borrowed, and its sole possession by God renders it unavailable for measurement, mortgage, or profitable use" (Strohm 123). Both of these concepts are ideological constructions that were sustained, as Strohm notes, "by the principal political and economic institutions of the age" (123). My focus in this article is on the text's emphasis on merchant's time, here displayed by artisans, and the striving of these characters for a type of material gain through the quality of their work as they pin Christ. Whereas the Son will speak of a larger purpose and forgiveness, the workers are mistakenly consumed by their temporal actions and condition.

In the introductory matter before the York play in his anthology, *Medieval Drama*, Bevington describes the uncanny attention that the soldiers pay to their work, while being oblivious to the terrible sin that they are committing: "Proud of their skill and yet comically incompetent to us, the soldiers so lose themselves in their world of mechanical details that they have no sense of the large issues confronting them" (569). There is no doubt that Bevington correctly recognizes that the soldiers miss the larger issues that surround them, but one might easily disagree with his assertion that the workers are "comically incompetent." On the contrary, the one theme that is constant throughout the text is the diligence that the soldiers pay to their work; they genuinely seem to want to do a good job. For example, prior to placing Christ on the cross, the soldiers carefully look over their tools. The carpentry cliché, measure twice and cut once, is an appropriate description of their actions:

III MILES. Sen ilke a thyng es right arrayed,
The wiselier now we wirke may we.
IV MILES. Þe crosse on grounde is goodely graied,
And boorede even as it awith to be.
I MILES. Lokis þat þe ladde on the lenghe be layde
And made me þane vnto þis tree. (37-42)

As this passage suggests, the soldiers are very attentive to fine detail. The third soldier comments upon the overall setup and determines that it is conducive to working “wiselier” or better. The fourth soldier remarks, with more precision, that the individually bored holes appear to line up properly. Finally, the first soldier offers specific instruction about how Jesus should be placed on the cross, and, just to make sure that no one errs, the soldier notes that Christ should be placed lengthwise. All of these observations suggest a group of workmen who are very careful and concerned about performing their duties to their utmost abilities, not bumbling individuals who do not care about what they are doing.

The anxiety that the soldiers express over doing high-quality work is expressed again and again when they labor to pin Christ to the cross. As their work becomes increasingly difficult, tensions begin to run high:

I MILES. Why carp ge so? Faste on a corde
And tugge hym to, by toppe and taile. (113-14)

The first soldier tends to be the verbal aggressor. He wants to know why others think they have the right to “carp,” and the implication is that their words are taking away from their level of productivity. As the soldiers continue to work, he continues to chastise them, even attempting to silence complaints about the rigors of the job:

I MILES. Say man, whi carpis pou soo?
Thy lifyng was but light. (165-66)

Obviously the focus of this passage is once again to continue to urge the men to do their jobs well, but this passage also contains the suggestion that one should perform one’s work willingly, without complaining; work should be valued for work’s sake. When performed in front of a crowd that would undoubtedly have included a high number of laborers and fellow middle-strata members, this message should have resonated with the audience. Hard work would have been a regular part of daily life, and the soldiers provide an example of one way in which to approach it.

Even when they directly address Christ, taking him to task for the perceived traitorous actions that He has committed, they frame His punishment in economic terms:

III MILES. Come forthe, þou cursed knave,
Thy comforte sone schall kele.

IV MILES. Thyne hyre here schall þou haue. (45-47)

“Hyre” in the above passage can be glossed as “wages,” and this word choice is striking. The soldiers, in a way, are employing the traditional Christian message that one reaps what one sows. The implication is that Christ has been a bad worker and that his salary will fit his production. Thus, this is one of the first points in the text at which audiences recognize, because of the allusion to the process of exchange, that even though the workmanship of the soldiers is repeatedly stressed, more than the production of goods is at stake.

Ultimately, there seem to be two competing discourses in the York *Crucifixion* that, on the surface, are difficult to reconcile: the language of commerce and the language of salvation. The first is delivered by the soldiers and the latter is delivered by Christ, and it is in the juxtaposition of the two that the audience is meant to understand the warning that the text provides.

The dramatist gives Christ two speeches in the play, the two longest speeches in the *Crucifixion*. But it is more than the length that separates Jesus’s discourse from that of the soldiers; the focus shifts from the importance of achieving a high-quality product to the importance of achieving spiritual salvation, and the soldiers are utterly baffled by the move. Unsurprisingly, allusions to economics frame Christ’s introduction in the drama. He voluntarily walks onto the cross, which allows one of the soldiers to exclaim that now they’ll “wirke . . . wele” (48). Jesus, however, gives no indication that he cares about the labor happening around Him, and His message is detached from His current surroundings. Christ, in eleven lines, gives a short summary of His mission on earth that began with Adam’s fall. But even in this discussion, there is a reference to wealth, although not the material kind that the workers recognize:

JESUS. And soueraynely beseke I þe
That þai for me may fauoure fynde;
And fro þe fende þame fende,
So þat þer saules be saffe
In welthe withouten ende—. (55-59)

The wealth that Jesus alludes to in this passage is not a literal possession; it is an allegory of Christian redemption. The soldiers, however, are not good allegorical readers. Their interests are in the present world, and thus their interests are placed in everything that is temporal and carnal. The soldiers' bewilderment at Christ's message is evident in the first lines that are delivered after His speech:

I MILES. We, herke sir knyghtis, for Mahoundis bloode,
Of Adam-kynde is all his þoght.
II MILES. Þe warlowe waxis werre þan woode,
Þis doulfull dede ne dredith he noght. (61-64)

Their reaction is important for several reasons. First, it establishes their lack of recognition of the basic Christian message. Although Christ's tone is far from colloquial in his address, neither is it laden with elevated language or Latin. In other words, everyone should understand the message. Additionally, the soldiers' reaction reconfirms their attachment to all that is transitory. The second soldier cannot understand why Christ is frightened at his impending fate, because current happenings are all that the soldier himself can comprehend. Ideally though, a medieval audience with knowledge of Augustine's teachings of carnal and allegorical interpretations should understand the error that the soldiers are committing. They are not evil characters, but they are terrible interpreters.

The soldiers' failure to recognize Christ's message is not an isolated occurrence, and their continued lack of recognition becomes apparent when Christ makes his second and final speech in the play. The entire exchange between the two groups displays a disconnect between their varying interests; the soldiers care only about economics and work, and Christ cares only about His mission. Therefore, when the soldiers attempt to engage Christ in conversation, their efforts are misguided:

I MILES. Say sir, howe likis you nowe,
Þis werke þat we haue wrought?
IV MILES. We praye youe sais vs howe
ʒe fele, or faynte ʒe ought. (249-52)

Audience members should immediately recognize the wonderful irony that the York dramatist uses in this passage. The soldiers are doing

something proper by “praying”—admittedly, “prayer” in this context is more akin to beseech, but the multiple connotations are not coincidence—even though their efforts are laughable. They should be praying for salvation. The soldiers, however, are more concerned with the quality of their work. They pray that the Lord will validate their efforts by praising their craftsmanship, and the audience should quickly understand this mistake. If, however, audience members should fail to comprehend the soldiers’ error, Christ’s speech, which appears tangential on the surface, highlights the true message that audiences should take from the play:

JESUS. Al men þat walkis by waye or street,
Takes tente 3e schalle no trauayle tyne.
Byholdes myn heede, myn handis, and my feete,
And fully feele nowe, or 3e fyne,
Yf any mournyng may be meete,
Or myscheue mesured vnto myne.
My fadir, þat alle bales may bete,
Forgiffis þes men þat dois me pyne.
What þei wirke wotte þai noght;
Therefore, my fadir, I craue,
Latte neuere þer synnys be sought,
But see þer saules to saue. (253-64)

This address appears particularly directed toward audience members standing before a pageant cart. It is unlikely that Christ would address spectators passing in the “street” otherwise, and this allusion has no biblical precedent because Christ was not crucified in the city, but atop a hill. But the importance of this passage is in its not-too-thinly-veiled warning to the York bourgeois. In the space of eleven lines, Jesus uses the language of economics twice: “travaile,” which can be glossed as labor, and “wirke.” It is equally important to note that Christ is not condemning others by using economic terms, but He is pointing out how one should direct one’s efforts. The labor that Christ fears the audience will lose is the ability to focus on redemption. The line that immediately follows Jesus’s reference to labor evokes affective piety. Christ asks everyone’s gaze to linger on his head, hands, and feet. This religious blazon should be one’s primary labor, and this is not the main focus of the soldiers. Thus, what initially appears as a detached response to the soldiers’ prompts becomes a re-appropriation of the

very thing that they prize more than anything else. The soldiers, however, are oblivious to the message that Christ delivers. After His speech, they are disconcerted by His move away from talking about the physical world:

I MILES. We, harke, he jangelis like a jay.
II MILES. Methynke he patris like a py.
III MILES. He has ben doand all þis day,
And made grete meuyng of mercy.
IV MILES. Es þis þe same þat gune vs say
That he was Goddis sone almyghty? (265-70)

At this point in the drama, audiences should be well aware of the foolishness of the soldiers' words. It is not Christ who has been frivolously chirping like a songbird; it is the soldiers in their incessant banter about work, money, and economics generally. These are the characteristics of the temporal world, a world of which Christ is not a part. Therefore, the soldiers' criticism of Christ serves to reinforce the message that He delivers in His two allotted speeches; one should not place too much stock in one's material endeavors. Furthermore, the soldiers' continued actions as the play ends highlight their misdirection. As in the biblical analogue, they barter and trade for Christ's remaining possessions. In the context of this play, though, these actions represent a different meaning. Only several lines prior, the soldiers ask Christ to comment upon their work, and then, immediately following what they think to be an unintelligible answer, they enact the likely next step of any artisan venture, trade. If something is to be made, it must also be sold, and, in a town like York, that would often involve trade, including international trade. Thus in the closing lines of the text, audiences see how the fiscal gluttony of certain characters causes them to miss a chance at salvation, a mistake the York dramatist tries to prevent his audience from emulating.

Kansas Wesleyan University

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